

Sports

Anticipation high for annual Molokai-to-Oahu race

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The Waikiki Beach “Girls” enter Sunday’s competition as defending champions and also won the race in 2011.

After an additional year of waiting, favorites and hopeful challengers will finally get an opportunity to vie for outrigger canoe paddling’s world championship.

37TH ANNUAL HAWAIIAN AIRLINES NA WAHINE O KE KAI

>> When: Sunday

>> Where: Starts at Hale O Lono Harbor, Molokai, ends at Duke Kahanamoku Beach, Oahu (41 miles)

>> Time: Race is scheduled to begin at 7:30 a.m. with the top finishers expected to finish around 1 p.m.

>> Recent champions: The Waikiki Beach Boys are the defending Na Wahine O Ke Kai champions (the crew won in 2014 and last year's race was canceled) and also won the race in 2011. Team Bradley has won eight of the past 10 races, including six straight titles from 2005-2010. Offshore (Calif.) also won the race six consecutive times (1986-1991) and won the event 10 times out of 11 tries (1986-1996).

>> Record time: Team Bradley set the record of 5 hours, 22 minutes and 5 seconds in 2008.

>> Divisions: Junior (16-18 years old), Open (18-and-over), Junior Masters (40-and-over), Senior Masters (50-and-over) and Golden Masters (55-and-over) as well as a Koa canoe division.

This year's edition of the Hawaiian Airlines Na Wahine O Ke Kai carries an enhanced level of anticipation after the 2015 race was canceled due to strong winds and treacherous surf that would have made the Kaiwi Channel crossing too dangerous to attempt. It was just the second time in race history that the marquee event was scratched.

While the outcome of any Molokai-to-Oahu race is as difficult to predict as the currents and churning swells that occupy the dangerous expanse of open

ocean, the Waikiki Beach Boys and Team Bradley are expected to lead the pack throughout the 37th edition of the 41-mile race from Hale O Lono Harbor, Molokai, to Duke Kahanamoku Beach fronting the Hilton Hawaiian Village in Waikiki.

Sunday's race field also features a host of worthy challengers, including talented squads from Outrigger, Lanikai and Kailua that are looking to make waves atop the leaderboard. The race is considered the sport's world championship. This year's collection features 80 crews.

The Waikiki Beach Boys enter the competition as defending Na Wahine O Ke Kai champions, and also won the race in 2011. Team Bradley has claimed eight of the past 10 titles, including six straight crowns from 2005 to 2010, and set the current race record time of 5 hours, 22 minutes and 5 seconds in 2008.

"As defending champions, and coming back after the break caused by last year's cancellation ... we've got to dial in and concentrate on what each of us needs to do in order to be successful," said veteran Waikiki "Beach Girl" Dana Yaross. "Having that blend is crucial, and when you don't have it, you feel it."

During the summer, Waikiki claimed its eighth consecutive senior women's title at the Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association's state championship regatta. The squad also competed in and won the 20th annual Hawaiian Airlines Liberty Challenge in an "unlimited" canoe, and showed the worldwide field a glimpse of what it has to offer throughout the 15-mile race held in the busy waters of New York Harbor.

"No matter what your success throughout the season suggests, to come back and repeat is a tough feat," said Yaross of the back-to-back bid.

Lauren Spalding of Team Bradley has completed the Molokai-to-Oahu crossing every year but once since 1996, and has also traversed the Kaiwi Channel numerous times in one-man vessels. She explained that the accomplishment of completing the daunting crossing is a victory in itself, but that actually winning carries with it unparalleled prestige.

By fielding a talented crew composed of paddlers from Kauai, Oahu, Molokai, Maui and the Big Island, Team Bradley rarely is able to practice together. The squad makes up for the lack of group training by working out on one-person canoes and cross-training; by sticking to the rigorous program, the team continues to compete at an elite level despite actually paddling together just a handful of times each year.

“So much can change in the channel,” said Spalding. “The Beach Girls are always competitive, and Outrigger is right there. Molokai is going to be a great race.”

Traci Phillips is used to high-level competition on the water, as the Outrigger paddler competed in multiple kayaking events in the 1988, 1992 and 1996 Olympic Games. As a veteran competitor who has also taken on an enhanced leadership role in tune with guidance from coaches Johnny Puakea and Billy Pratt, Phillips will serve as a calming force amid a talented young Outrigger crew.

“Molokai is a different animal,” said Phillips, who helped Outrigger notch a runner-up finish at the 25-mile Dad Center Race in late August, an event won by Team Bradley. “(Team) Bradley and a lot of these other girls out here paddling, they’re tough and know how to put the hammer down.”

In distance races, crews are accompanied by motored escort boats and are allowed to substitute paddlers along the way to provide for ample breaks and hydration.

The men will compete at the Hawaiian Airlines Molokai Hoe on Oct. 9 and will follow the same course as the Na Wahine O Ke Kai in the final event of the outrigger canoe paddling season.